

VIEWPOINT: Use & Lose law necessary to prevent illegal underage drinking*By JAMES R. "DUKE" AIONA*

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I was truly saddened to read about the two women who were killed recently in a fiery head-on collision on the Moanalua Freeway. The crash was reportedly caused by an intoxicated 20-year-old woman driving the wrong way onto the freeway. The medical examiner later revealed that the young woman was also pregnant.

Each time I read about another fatal accident caused by illegal underage drinking, I am reminded that many of these senseless tragedies can be avoided if we as a community take a more proactive approach to prevent them from happening.

To curb the tragic consequences of underage drinking, the Lingle-Aiona administration introduced Senate Bill 706, known as the Use & Lose law. Simply put, the Use & Lose law would suspend the driving privileges of all those under the age of 21 who are convicted of illegally purchasing or possessing alcohol. For those not yet licensed to drive, the judge will have discretion to postpone their eligibility to obtain a license for a minimum of 180 days or until they turn 17. Additionally, under this bill, all violators will be required to perform 75 hours of community service, and undergo eight to 12 hours of alcohol education and counseling.

This legislation has wide support from Senate and House legislative committees and numerous community organizations, such as the Department of the Prosecuting Attorney of the City and County of Honolulu, the attorney general, the Honolulu Police Department, and MADD-Hawaii.

As of Jan. 1, 36 other states already have some form of Use & Lose law on the books. That means Hawaii is currently in the minority of states who do not have a Use & Lose law in effect.

In January 2005, the Lingle-Aiona administration released the Hawai'i Drug Control and Underage Drinking Plan, the framework for the state to move forward with a coordinated and comprehensive approach to address illicit drug use and underage drinking. One of the three identified strategies of the Hawai'i Drug Control Plan is "to prevent illicit drug use and underage drinking before it starts."

Reducing underage drinking is a high priority for our administration. Alcohol is by far the No. 1 drug of choice for Hawaii teens. It is an entry-level drug that often leads to abuse of other illegal substances such as marijuana or crystal methamphetamine. Underage drinking has also been associated with poor academic performance, violence, suicide, risky sexual activities, victimization, other problem behaviors and death.

Moreover, even if it never leads to the abuse of other illegal drugs, underage alcohol use in and of itself places our entire community at risk. Did you know that underage alcohol use is more likely to kill young people than all other illegal drugs combined? Did you know that motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among youth ages 15 to 20? Did you know that in 2001, underage drinking cost the citizens of Hawaii \$182 million?

To make matters worse, approximately 35 percent of Hawaii students report they first drank

alcohol (more than a few sips) before age 13. Additionally, one-third of Hawaii 10th-graders report having been drunk at least once and 72 percent of them say that alcohol is fairly easy to get.

Clearly, underage drinking must be addressed. It can no longer be viewed as a minor infraction or a simple rite of passage for our teens. By condoning underage drinking, we as a society are perpetuating this destructive cycle.

As a former Family Court judge, I have seen firsthand the devastating consequences of illegal underage drinking on our community. I also know that a driver's license is often a teenager's most prized possession because it represents a new-found freedom. Use & Lose laws have worked across the country because they send a clear message to young people – if you want to keep your driver's license, you must stay sober.

A change in Hawaii's laws relating to underage drinking is essential to reducing the negative impact it has on our islands' communities and families. Therefore, I urge you to contact your legislator to support SB 706. This bill has recently passed a full floor vote in the House of Representatives and will soon be considered by a conference committee made up of members of both the House and Senate. Public support for this measure from people across our state is a vital component to its success.

Thank you for caring about our community and for recognizing that we are all stakeholders in the fight against illegal drugs and underage drinking. To learn more about how you can support the legislation I've discussed, please contact my office at (808) 586-0255 or e-mail me at LtGov@hawaii.gov. For more information, please visit our Web site at www.hawaii.gov/ltgov.

■ James R. "Duke" Aiona Jr. is the lieutenant governor of the state of Hawaii.

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